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When science meets the bottom trawling debate

4 February 2022

As we head into another maelstrom of political debate over bottom trawling in 2022, it is heartening to see science is again showing good fisheries management is almost always the answer.

A recent paper published in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Science in the United States (PNAS) proved fishing in New Zealand, along with Australia, Chile, the United States, and South Africa is having little impact on the ocean floor.

The paper drew on research from 2017 that devised an impact ratio on the sea floor when taking into account the frequency of trawls, the gear that was used, and the relative recovery and population of a species.

The study called this measure Relative Benthic Status (RBS). In short, an RBS score of 0.95 means the seabed is 95 percent unaffected by bottom trawling.

The latest study, released last month, and co-authored by Ray Hilborn of the University of Washington, examined 24 marine areas around the world and measured their RBS.

The report by [Pitcher et al](#) clearly showed that countries with effective fisheries management regimes were having little impact on the sea floor.

A visual depiction of the findings of the study can be found below.

The industry is currently, and will continue to be, under fire for bottom trawling.

The truth of the matter is that 92 percent of all New Zealand's seabed has never been trawled, however the domestic supply of fish currently relies on trawling, as it is an efficient and effective method of catching fish.

Trawling provides seafood for New Zealanders at reasonable prices, which does not mean we shouldn't look at where we fish.

There are plenty of areas around New Zealand where the industry has voluntarily withdrawn from, perhaps because they are highly biodiverse, or they are nursery grounds or juvenile grounds, or to allow recreational fishers unfettered access over summer.

There is a case to be made to talk about where we shouldn't trawl for specific purposes, but a one-sized solution is not the answer.

In a recent interview with the producers of an upcoming documentary on the Hauraki Gulf, Seafood New Zealand chief executive Jeremy Helson summed the argument up this way:

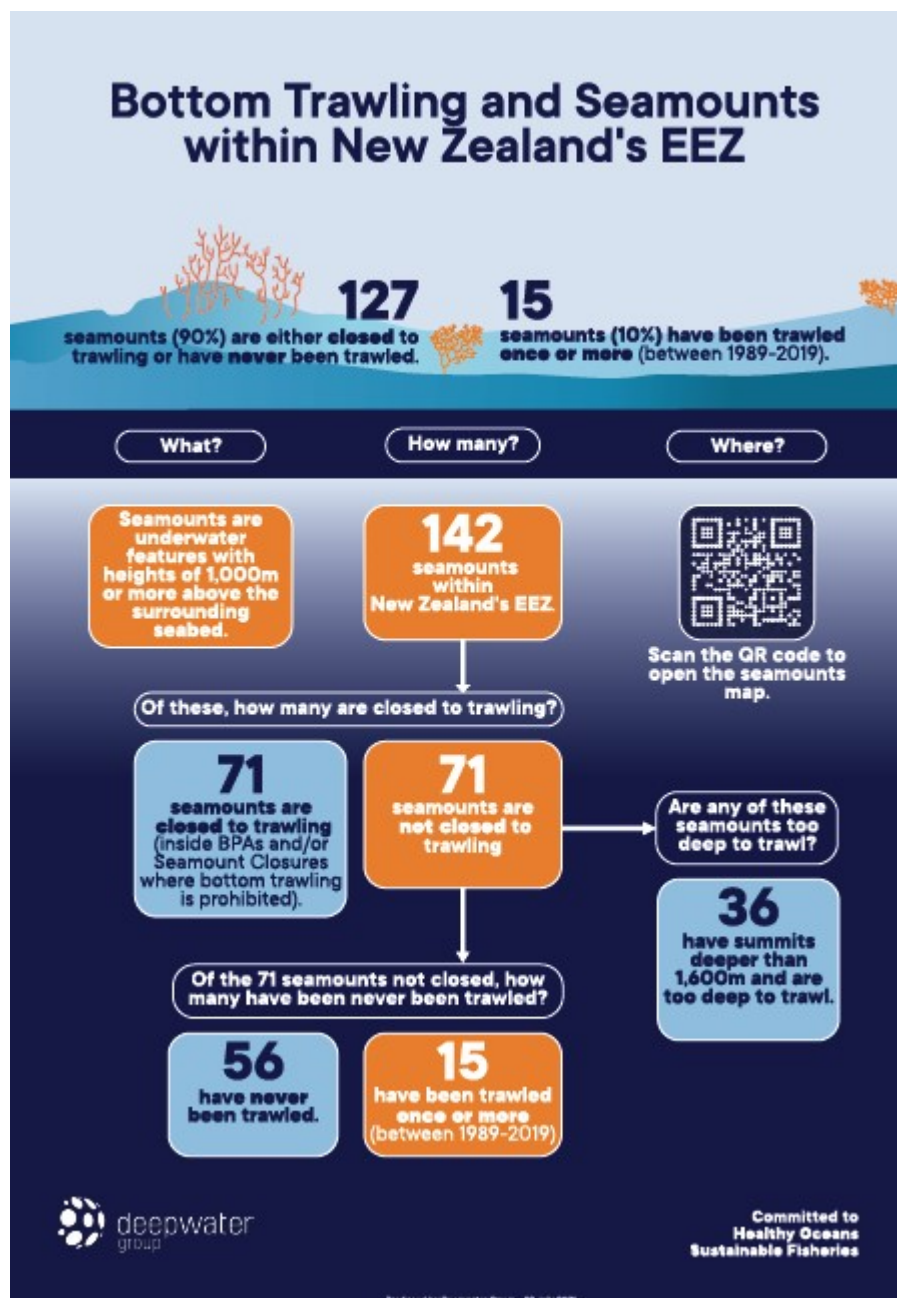
"I think trawling is one of those things that is hugely misunderstood and mischaracterised. People have this idea that these enormous nets and enormous boats are hoovering up everything in their path, and frankly it's nothing like that. Trawling can actually be a pretty sophisticated fishing method. It can be very targeted.

Some of the trawlers that fish out there are very adept at changing their gear in subtle ways to target one fish and not another. They are small, subtle differences that you and I might not notice. They understand the way that fish swim, they understand how fish behave when they encounter a net – the swimming speeds – they know where to tow and what depth to tow at.

So, this idea that it is just people going out there are going up and down and catching anything they can,

couldn't be further from the truth. It is not an indiscriminate method at all. It can be very selective. It does sometimes touch the seabed, and I think that is something that the industry is cognisant of. We don't trawl areas that could potentially damage our nets or that have rough, foul ground and those sorts of places are often highly diverse or have fish nurseries.

I think we are quite mindful of how we fish and where we fish and we are mindful that we want public support, but I think also that the public does misunderstand trawling and it has been mischaracterised in many, many respects. Certainly, we will keep working with the public and government to make sure they understand the process better and we will respond to that accordingly."



Border reopening promising

The Government yesterday announced its five-stage border reopening plan, starting with fully vaccinated Kiwis from Australia being able to re-enter the country and self-isolate from 27 February.

You can read more about the staggered approach in more detail on [the Beehive website](#).

All being well, Aotearoa will once again be able to receive visitors, including those under the working holiday scheme. It will be the first time we, as a nation, will open up to the world since the onset of Covid-19 in 2020.

We welcome this decision for multiple reasons. It will not only allow more New Zealanders to come home and reunite with family and loved ones, it's also a win for the seafood industry which (as with all of the primary industries), has been affected by the labour shortage caused by the pandemic.

The industry is still absolutely committed to recruiting Kiwis into the sector, and the upcoming influx of returnees will help as we transition to our long-term goals of getting hard-working New Zealanders into local jobs.

You can check out some of the exciting careers the industry has to offer on our website: <https://www.seafood.co.nz/careers>

Graphic courtesy of Deepwater Group



Programme and registration details will be available soon



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